The Two Other Big Joe Williams

By Bob Groom

As far as we can be sure Big Joe Williams' first solo recordings were for Bluebird in February, 1935 and I have always felt they have been underrated. Recording with a six-string guitar at this point, Joe sings and plays with great power and conviction and in terms of dynamics approaches the impact of Robert Johnson. The late Bernard Holland was a great booster of Joe's prowess and felt that he was unfairly overshadowed by his contemporaries in critical acclaim, a view with which I can but agree.

When Joe had his second Bluebird session in Chicago in October, 1935 another fine Mississippi artist made his only four sides in the same recording studio. I asked Joe what he knew about Otto Virgil but he was surprisingly non-committal, simply indicating that he was from Joe's home area but played in the Delta.

Virgil's 'Bad Notion Blues' is lyrically loosely based on Charles Pettens 'Love My Stuff', although quite different instrumentally, and this would seem to confirm his Delta affiliation. Little Girl In Rome indicates that he had a girlfriend there while 'Got The Blues About Rome', which utilises verses from Blind Lemon Jefferson recordings (including the title verse of 'Matchbox Blues') includes the line 'I've got the blues about Rome, but Rome is not my home'. The small town of Rome is on Highway 49 West in Sunflower County in the Delta.

Otto Virgil was in fact born in Columbus, the county seat of Lowndes County in East Mississippi on 20th October 1905 and later lived in East St. Louis, Illinois, possibly dying there circa 1939. Big Joe Williams grew up in Crawford, also in Lowndes County, and occasionally returned there to see his mother during his endless ramblings. There seems little doubt that Virgil and Virgil were one and the same man. The latter name being certainly responsible for Otto's one appearance on record. In later years he acted as a part-time talent scout for several record labels. It seems an odd coincidence that Otto should sing about a town named Rome and seemingly be named after the great Roman poet Virgil, author of the Aenid. Perhaps it was originally a slave name.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Chris Smith for sight of Virgil's draft card, completed 16th October 1940 in East St. Louis, which gives his birthplace/date and says that he was 6 feet 9 inches tall, 180 pounds and worked for the Skulling's Steel Company in St. Louis. His wife is given as Benita Virgil but a marriage license application seems to suggest that he remarried some years later to one Eva Geeter. See also Page 112 of 'Blues: A Regional Experience' by Bob Eagle and Eric LeBlanc (Praeger, 2013). All four titles are available on 'Mississippi Blues Volume 4' (Document DOCD 5582).

Blues & Rhythm 348 24